

## Birds of a Feather

A new parrot sanctuary aids in recovery for patients at the West L.A. veterans hospital

By ALLISON MILIONIS 06-07-07

Matthew H. Simons isn't the kind of guy you would imagine spoon-feeding warm oatmeal to a middle-age cockatoo. The burly six-foot Desert Storm and Desert Shield veteran seems more like a big-dog guy and six months ago he would have agreed. But Simons has changed. Since being assigned to the Serenity Park Sanctuary, a non-profit parrot refuge on the grounds of the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Westwood, Simons has acquired a new appreciation for birds.

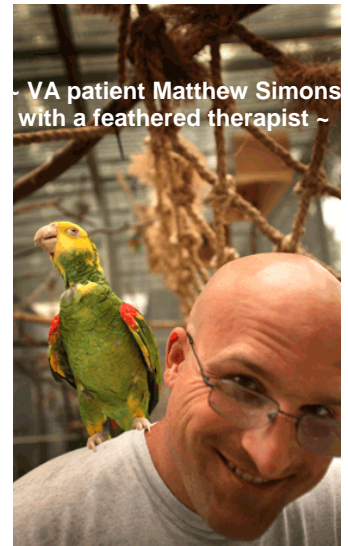
Simons, 33, works at the sanctuary nearly every day. It's an essential part of his treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and related behavioral problems that have plagued him for the past decade. "I like to say that working with birds is kind of like Prozac," he says. "You have to be gentle and calm, something that I've never been before."

Under a canopy of towering eucalyptus trees, Serenity Park, which opened to the public on May 31, sits nicely in the Vets' Garden, a 20-acre natural oasis run by vets as part of the Horticulture Therapy Program. In spite of its proximity to one of the busiest freeways in the world, very little urban clamor penetrates the tangle of wild and manicured foliage.

Dr. Lorin Lindner, eco-psychologist and founder of Serenity Park, couldn't have asked for a better site. The VA provided the land after she proposed an unconventional "trans-species" occupational therapy program that matched veterans with parrots that had suffered from abuse or abandonment. Lindner, a high-energy, petite woman had witnessed the positive effect birds had on veterans at a parrot sanctuary in Ojai. As a clinical director at New Directions, a non-profit, homeless veterans program that partners with the VA, Lindner often took groups to the Ojai sanctuary where they cleaned cages, chopped vegetables, and fed the birds.

"I saw real emotional progress and maturity," says Lindner. "They developed a greater sense of empathy. The birds are similarly suffering from traumatic stress and that commonality helps them to heal – both the veterans and the birds."

The VA agreed to let her use a site occupied by a dilapidated basketball court but couldn't pay for the construction of the sanctuary, the program, or its upkeep. Within a year, Lindner had secured \$50,000 in grant money from Santa Monica-based Naturganic Foundation, followed by two grants totaling \$12,000 from the Mary Jo and Hank Greenberg Animal Welfare Foundation. And after a chance meeting with architect Rouben Mohiuddin, the dean of Interior Design at the American Intercontinental University, he agreed to work on the sanctuary, pro bono.



VA patient Matthew Simons with a feathered therapist ~

With help from students in his community outreach class, Mohiuddin tore up and cleared the old asphalt, built benches out of dirt from the site, and designed a small multi-purpose building that serves as office, utility shed, and kitchen. Four huge aviaries filled with ropes, toys, and plants donated by local organizations and businesses surround a courtyard filled with plants and flowers grown in the Vets' Garden.

Stanley Smith, 63, rolls a cigarette and sits down under one of the eucalyptus trees near an aviary that holds two rescued parrots, a gorgeous 19-year-old macaw named Sherman, and his equally striking partner, a 29-year-old military macaw named Corky. Smith checked himself into New Directions last November. Unlike Simons, Smith didn't come to L.A. to heal the wounds of war; his was a battle with the bottle. As a Vietnam War veteran (he was an Air Force sentry dog handler), Smith qualifies for the substance abuse program that includes a six-day detox, participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, and job therapy.

Lindner can provide 70 hours a week of compensated work therapy, which equates to one full-time and one part-time position. But it's not unusual for the vets to be at the sanctuary all day, seven days a week. Both Smith and Simons say that they want to be there. And in many ways, they need to be there.

"In group therapy and single therapy, you talk about a lot of stuff and you're in a room with eight or more incredibly screwed-up people, so never is there a normal dynamic in those relationships," says Simons. "But I come here. I have to have a straightforward relationship with these animals. I have responsibilities to come here at certain times and do certain things."

All the parrots at Serenity Park are also suffering from some form of trauma, whether it was abandonment, abuse at the hands of animal traffickers, or condemnation to a flightless life in a cage. The commonality, Lindner believes, is what helps the vets to bond with the birds and to hasten the recovery and healing process. "Here we have veterans with PTSD caring for birds with PTSD. It's a perfect fit," she says.

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